



Miller Time

BY JAMIE TWORKOWSKI
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RELIGION IS A BIG, BEAUTIFUL, UGLY THING. I READ RECENTLY WHERE AUGUSTINE SAID, 'THE CHURCH IS A WHORE AND IT IS MY MOTHER.' AND FOR REASONS I DON'T UNDERSTAND, JESUS LOVES THE CHURCH. AND I SUPPOSE HE LOVES THE CHURCH WITH THE SAME STRENGTH OF CHARACTER HE DISPLAYS IN HIS LOVE FOR ME. SOMETIMES IT IS DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHICH IS THE GREATER MIRACLE.

—DONALD MILLER, FROM HIS BOOK, *SEARCHING FOR GOD KNOWS WHAT*

Q: WHAT DO YOU DO WITH ALL THE WOMEN WHO FALL AT YOUR FEET NOW THAT YOU'RE FAMOUS?

A: "Well, they don't exactly fall at my feet, but if they did, I suppose I would help them up or something. God knows I have fallen down in public, and that's just embarrassing."

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Ask just about any Christian twentysomething what they're reading these days, and chances are it's a title by author Don Miller. In *Blue Like Jazz* and *Searching for God Knows What* (Thomas Nelson), Miller articulates everyday faith with simple (and often very funny) stories.

"I just want to write stories that have a lot of crazy things happening to crazy people," Miller said. "If it happens to have some theological truth in it, cha-ching."

An author and a speaker, Miller's words are full of personality and honesty. His books explore what it means to follow Jesus today and the immense value of community, social justice and love.

The 33-year-old traveling Texan now calls Portland, Ore., home. On a typical morning, you'll find Miller at Common Ground coffeeshouse, laughing and typing against a laptop's bright stare, Patty Griffin singing in his ear. Late at night, you'll find him in conversation at the Horse Brass Pub, drinking beer and loving people. He is telling his stories, and people are listening.

Writers, musicians, thinkers and people of all kinds are connecting with Miller, some over his latest work, some at conferences or campus ministry events, others actually with him over a cup of coffee. Miller loves creating and building relationships, always ready to collaborate or share what he's learned about life, faith and writing.

Miller's pastor and dear friend Rick McKinley, whose book, *Jesus in the Margin: Finding God in the Places We Ignore* (Multnomah), said, "People are responding to Don's work because Don is them. He grew up sitting next to them in the pew, and he has had the courage to open his heart on paper in a way that makes you feel like you know him. And you do, because his struggles, doubts, ideas are the same ones you have, but you may [not] have felt safe in saying so."



MILLER ON LAMOTT

You won't talk to Don Miller very long before he mentions one of his biggest influences—author Anne Lamott. “Anne’s book *Traveling Mercies* was a turning point book for me. I had never read anybody who was so honest about their life, who wasn’t trying to romanticize everything, you know, and she got this power, this power of honesty, from her faith in Christ. That was an all new spin to me, and was relieving and it freed me, in a way, to write the sort of stuff I wanted to write, just to tell the truth about what it means to be human, for real, and how God kind of interacts with that, and is in that and works through that.”

Miller’s currently planning a creative community called the Burnside Writers Collective, an outlet for a group of writers/thinkers/speakers who are writing similar literature. “I want to create a catch-all for like-minded thinkers,” Miller said. “There are some cool voices out there that I think are entertaining and real and raw and profound, so it will be cool to shine the spotlight on some of these voices.” The initial lineup includes Miller, McKinley, Houston pastor and author Chris Seay and singer/songwriter Derek Webb. “We will make their stuff available online, and then also plan river trips, conferences and this sort of thing people can go to, to spend time with them,” he said. He also plans to produce a quarterly short-story publication called *The Ankeny Briefcase* that will print previously unpublished (only) writers and a bi-annual CD of unsigned singer/songwriters. (You can subscribe at www.ankenypublishing.com. Check out Burnside at www.burnsidewriterscollective.com.)

Miller plans to eventually include authors like Lauren Winner, another voice at the forefront of the young Christian memoir set. The author of *Girl Meets God* (Algonquin Books) and *Real Sex* (Brazos Press) said the adjective that is probably most often used in praising Miller’s work (and hers) is “authentic.” “I am so thankful for Don’s work,” she said. “He avoids

euphemism, and he always shoots straight. Christian readers, I think, are hungry for that straight-shooting.”

Consider the subtitle of *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*. “In some ways that subtitle, which might have been unimaginable 20 years ago, tells you everything you need to know about the book,” Winner said. “A reporter asked me if I would describe *Blue Like Jazz* as being geared toward ‘seekers’—I said I doubted that ‘seeker’ is the word Don would pick, and again that underscores the point—he is breaking out of the conventional, comfortable evangelical categories.”

There seems to be no shortage of material to stop that flow anytime soon. His latest book, *To Own a Dragon* (NavPress), releases in April. It’s written for guys who have grown up without fathers, like Miller himself. Much of the book is Miller reflecting, with humor and hope, on his friendship with John MacMurray, with whom he lived during his mid-20s. “John taught me a lot of the stuff a father should have taught me,” Miller said. “And I kind of wished guys who grew up without fathers, and there are a lot of us these days, could have somebody like John in their lives, so that gave birth to the book.” Miller calls *To Own a Dragon* the most direct book he’s written as “it talks pretty straight about the need to get off our [butts] and get jobs, to treat women with respect and adoration and to stay the hell out of prison.”

In August, expect a re-release of his first book *The Art of Volkwagen Maintenance*, which had previously been out of print. The new book will be called *Through Painted Deserts* (Thomas Nelson) and is the true story of a three-month road trip Miller and a friend took across the country. “The trip landed us penniless and living in the woods with a bunch of hippies,” Miller said. “But it was also a significant time for me spiritually. I mean I grew a lot in that act of rebellion. I was running from everything and ended up landing somewhere, in terms of faith, completely new.”

ANYBODY WHO KNOWS ME KNOWS THERE ISN'T A WHOLE LOT OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ME AND THE GUY WHO DELIVERS THE MAIL OR COLLECTS SHOPPING CARTS AT THE GROCERY STORE.

—DON MILLER

And if that wasn't enough for his already full plate, Miller, along with Seay, Winner and a few other writers, is also working on a new paraphrase of the Bible called *The Voice*, which will be rolled out by World Bible Publishing over the next three years: a New Testament, separate books, then the whole Bible. Seay is heading up the project. There is some rumor of controversy surrounding the project, since the authors involved aren't professional Bible scholars. But Miller isn't worried since they're writing a paraphrase, not a translation. "That takes a lot of the weight off," he said. "Essentially, the unique angle *The Voice* is taking is that different writers are being hired to work with different writers who wrote the original text. This, as opposed to one voice writing all of the voices. In addition, we have a team of Greek/Hebrew scholars who are keeping us out of the ditches. The kind of paraphrasing we are doing is the same kind that is done in every pulpit in America on Sunday morning, and great strides are being taken to make sure it is being done well and accurately. I am honored to be a part of it."

Miller doesn't remember a time when he wasn't writing. It's only recently he's focused his efforts on publishing Christian books. "I think I have always written. Early on, it was poetry, then I wrote a few articles, then put a book together. Since then, it has mostly been books. It

seemed like an outlet to express what I was feeling."

As Miller's writing projects expand, so do his traveling and speaking schedules. He describes it as satisfying and depressing at the same time. "There are now hundreds of people who I would love to know more, but simply can't," he said. "It isn't possible. And it is also something of a shock. Anybody who knows me knows there isn't a whole lot of difference between me and the guy who delivers the mail or collects shopping carts at the grocery store. So the idea that this has happened to me is somewhat laughable. But I want to have fun with it, because I know it is temporary." f

ONLINE BONUS: For more on Don Miller, visit our online bonus section at www.RELEVANTmagazine.com/w/issue13.

Photography by STEVE HARMON

DARE YOU TO READ

Switchfoot's Jon Foreman gave 15 copies of *Blue Like Jazz* as Christmas presents. Needless to say, he enjoys Miller's work. "I gave one to a friend who manages money, another to a friend who drives trash trucks and another to a friend who plays the rock 'n' roll guitar. The strength of Don's writing is in his honesty, like a fighter who refuses to pull the punches even when a few of them land on his own chin."